SOUND ON SOUND
The World's Best Music Recording Magazine

Mazda Kaleidoscope

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Impressions

Presonus Faderport £159

pros

- Compact and affordable.
- Handles all the main transport and automation functions.
- HUI compatibility.

cons

- Not all functions work as they should in all DAW applications, though the forthcoming updates should remedy this.
- No cursor wheel.

summary

Currently there are relatively few small devices of this type on the market, but it seems like a great idea for anyone who has limited space or needs their controller to be portable. Simple though it is, the Faderport makes operating a DAW far more pleasurable than working by mouse and keyboard alone.

information

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Presonus Faderport

USB Control Surface [Mac/PC]

Reviews : MIDI Controller

Published in SOS June 2007

Print article : Close window

Hands-on control of your DAW can speed up your workflow considerably, but what if you don't want or need a console-sized controller? Enter the Presonus Faderport...

Paul White

There's no denying that hardware control surfaces make life a lot easier when it comes to controlling key operational functions of recording software, but not everyone has the space or budget for a large, multi-channel controller. The Presonus Faderport is a new compact device that provides convenient access to what you're likely to use most, rather than trying to control every possible function.

Photos: Mark Ewing

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Prêt À Fader

Physically, the Faderport is about the size of a small paperback book and its housing comprises a folded metal facia over a plastic sub-chassis. It has a jack on the rear for connecting a footswitch, which is useful for hands-free punching-in if your DAW allows it. The top surface has a single long-throw motorised fader, a rotary encoder for pan adjustment and 24 illuminated buttons, five of which are transport keys. The unit connects via USB, from which it can also draw its power, although you'll need to connect the included PSU to use the fader in motorised mode.

The Faderport is compatible with all the commonly available DAWs for Mac OS X and Windows XP. It should be noted, though, that functionality is limited in some cases, depending on how the sequencer's own external control system works. Faderport supports *Cubase*/*Nuendo*, *Digital Performer* and *Sonar 6* directly, whereas *Logic*, *Pro Tools* and other HUI-compatible DAWs work via the existing HUI protocol.

I tested the Faderport using *Logic Pro*, which is currently probably the least well supported of all the common DAWs, though the imminent (at the time of writing) *Logic* driver should improve this. No driver software is currently needed, as Faderport uses the HUI protocol to control *Logic*. So all you have to do is go to Control Surfaces Setup, select 'HUI' and then set the MIDI input and output ports to 'Faderport'.

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Faderport On The PC

In order to get a PC perspective on the Faderport, Paul passed on the review unit to me after testing on his Mac system. Installation of the hardware under XP is a 'plug and play' operation and no specific drivers are required; the Faderport appears as a generic 'USB Audio Device'. However, the supplied software CD did include a DLL file for using the Faderport with *Cubase* (with which I intended to do my testing) and the installation of this is described very clearly in the printed manual.

All went well enough with my desktop test system until I tried to specify the MIDI In/Out ports for the Faderport within the *Cubase* Device Setup window; the 'USB Audio Device' drivers indicated in the documentation were simply not present to select. After a certain amount of head-scratching, re-plugging and connecting via both the motherboard USB ports and two different USB hubs, a quick visit to the Presonus web site forums suggested that some other users have reported a similar problem and Presonus are working to provide a solution. Some users have, however, also managed a successful work-around by switching to a different USB hub.

Not to be deterred, I then tried to install the Faderport on my new(ish) Rock laptop. On this system, the installation went without a hitch and, within five minutes, I had the Faderport working perfectly with *Cubase 4*. While I didn't carry out any extensive tests, all the key functions worked as advertised. As with any control surface, it does take some time to adjust your working habits (in particular, taming the urge to reach for the mouse) but I could easily see how the Faderport would speed up all sorts of basic mixing processes. In particular, I thought that the hardware transport controls and the ability to generate basic automation data for the *Cubase* mixer would be very useful.

From a practical perspective, the need for the external power supply to drive the fader in its motorised mode is a bit of a shame; power via the USB bus would be a much more elegant solution and I can only assume that there are technical constraints preventing this. Of course, having multiple faders for controlling several tracks at the same time would be preferable, and there are alternative (and generally more expensive) hardware controllers available that can do just that. However, if both space and budget are limited, the Faderport is a neat and workmanlike solution. That said, for PC users, a 'try before you buy' approach is probably recommended until Presonus solve the USB issue described above. *John Walden*

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In Use

The transport controls handle the usual play, record and fast-wind functions, and pressing the fast-wind also gives

you variable-rate cursor scrolling, where each subsequent press increases the scroll rate. I don't find this as friendly as a rotary jog/scrub wheel, but it works well enough for getting around.

Above the main transport buttons is a shift key (momentary action to latch, or press and hold to use as a non-latching shift) and buttons labelled Loop, Punch and User. Using the shift key, these buttons also allow the user to create markers and to step back and forth through any markers placed in the track, though this seemed not to work correctly in *Logic*. I found I couldn't create markers, and when trying to locate one, instead of going straight there it simply opened the dialogue box that lets you type in which marker to jump to. However, it is no hardship to navigate markers using keyboard shortcuts.

The single fader controls the currently selected track's level and, on DAWs that support it, may also be used to control the master output level. As touched upon earlier, this fader can be used manually with no additional power or it can operate in motorised mode when the included mains adaptor PSU is connected. A touch-sensitive fader cap facilitates the recording of mix automation in touch mode and there are separate automation mode buttons, all illuminated when active, for Read, Write, Touch and Fader Motor Off modes. Read and Write work as you would expect them to, and the last button is especially useful for mix playback, as it avoids the distraction of the fader noise.

Tracks are selected using the track up and down arrow keys or, by using the Bank key, you can jump in banks of eight tracks. Mute and Solo also work correctly (these apply to the track mixer, not the Arrange page) while the Rec button arms a track for recording as expected. An Undo (or Redo if you use Shift) button steps through your various levels of undo or redo.

If the designers are open to suggestions for future firmware updates, I'd like to see the Pan control double as a cursor position wheel in conjunction with the shift key, as it offers more precise control than the fast-wind buttons.

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Impressions

My test with *Logic Pro* on a G5 machine ran fine, with no problems other than the marker behaviour noted earlier. However, when I did the same test with a Macbook Pro I couldn't get the pan control to respond. Hopefully the forthcoming *Logic* driver will avoid this kind of inconsistency, but I suspect the problem was in *Logic Pro*'s (Intel version) HUI support and nothing to do with the Faderport hardware.

Despite some of the functions not currently being supported in *Logic*, controllers such as this (also see page 190 of this issue for some alternatives) really improve the experience of operating a software DAW, and having only one fader can actually be an advantage, as you're not continually looking around to see what fader controls which track, since the currently selected track, bus or output is always live. On my own Mackie Control system, the transport section is by far the most used part of the surface, along with the automation mode and loop/punch buttons, so I think Presonus have picked the correct functions to place at your fingertips without making operation in any way complicated. I would have preferred a wheel to control the cursor, but other than that the Faderport is a very neat solution for the home studio or on the road. SOS

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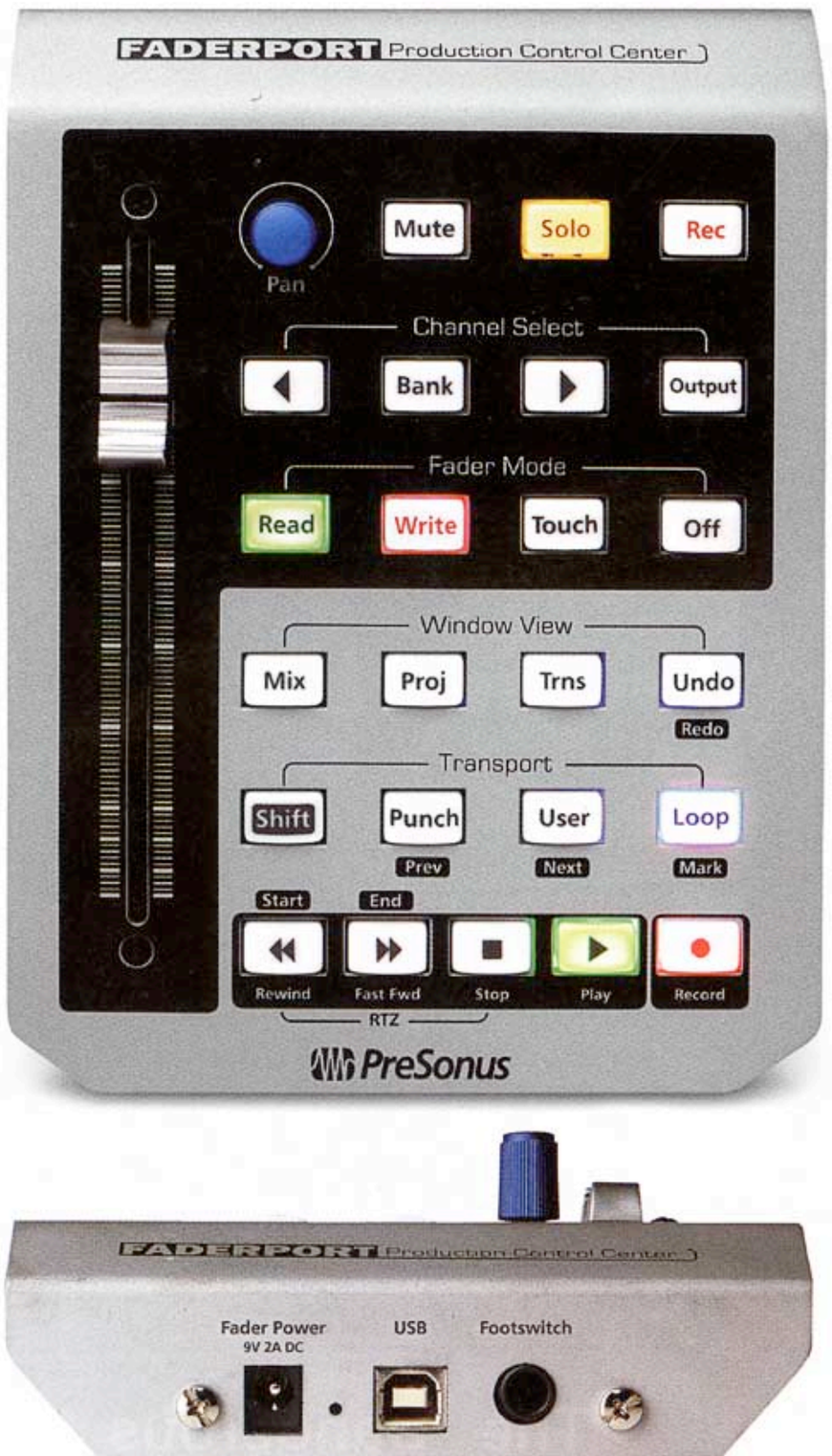
Presonus FaderPort

Sick of mixing with a rodent? ROB JAMES tries to alleviate his RSI with Presonus's affordable mini-controller.

We have all become familiar with performing everyday mixing tasks using a computer mouse, often in combination with keyboard shortcuts. However, just as it is possible to bang in a screw with a hammer or open a paint tin with a screwdriver *(Or a hammer. Ed)*, it works a whole lot better with a purpose-made tool, and so it is in the audio and video world with faders, knobs and buttons. Now, I'm a self-confessed control freak, and I've always found the mouse to be a poor (paw?) substitute for the real thing. However, conventional hardware control surfaces are not necessarily the answer. Sometimes less is more and this principle is equally applicable to controllers. Certainly a 'knob per function' control surface is highly desirable in some circumstances but, with today's operating practices and workflows, it can be total overkill — and that's without considering the cost. Middleweight hardware control surfaces are frequently more trouble than they are worth because of the inherent compromises. It is a lot harder to get to grips with eight or nine faders and associated controls as a window on a much larger virtual console than a single control strip. Keeping track of what is going on becomes a feat of mental prestidigitation worthy of Mr Memory.



There have been single-strip controllers before, but Presonus' new toy the FaderPort (UK£109.78 + VAT) distills the essentials, without trying to be too clever, at a highly attractive price. For starters, at a mere 180mm deep by 130mm wide and 40mm high, it doesn't hog valuable work surface space. The gently raked top and back is a single sheet of metal imparting a sense of solidity to the whole. The fader is a touch-sensitive, motorised ALPS 100mm-throw item with 10-bit resolution that translates into 1024 steps; enough to avoid zipper noise. This fader is the real McCoy with the same dual-servo belt-driven mechanism that you will find on many expensive consoles. The pan rotary controller is a shaft-encoder with the same blue knurled knob found on other Presonus devices, and none the worse for that. The buttons are less satisfactory, at least on first acquaintance. They need a firm press and have a short travel, which is fine for selection but initially off-putting as transport controls. In operation, this impression quickly dissipates to be replaced by gratitude for their positive action.

Around the back there are just three connections, a four-pin USB socket, a low-voltage power inlet for the motorised fader and a 1/4-inch footswitch jack for hands-free punch-ins. The unit itself is powered via the USB connection with fader power supplied by a wall wart. With the fader on the left, the top row has the pan knob, Mute, Solo and Rec-enable keys. Next down comes the Channel Select row with left and right 'shift by one channel arrow' keys and an Output key. If the channel shift keys are used in conjunction with the Bank key the focus is shifted in 8-channel increments. In the Fader Mode row, Read, Write, Touch and motor Off keys control automation. Dedicated keys toggle Mixer, Project Panel and Transport Control Panel panes on and off. Last key in this row is Undo which is also Redo when used with the Shift key in the Transport row which also has Punch User and Loop keys with Shifted functions of Previous, Next and Mark, respectively.

The transport keys themselves are where they belong at the bottom with Rewind, Fast Forward, Stop Play and Record. Stop and Rewind together give Return-To-Zero and Shift + Rewind/Fast-Forward give Start and End. In HUI Control mode (for use with Pro Tools, Logic and the like), the Output and User buttons don't do anything.

Installation can be as simple as plugging the FaderPort in. For applications that only support HUI, that's it; the necessary drivers are installed automatically. If there is a dedicated driver, then this needs to be copied and installed. I used Nuendo and here it's a simple matter of dropping a DLL file into a folder. Application set-up obviously differs according to the software of your choice, but in Nuendo at least, it only took a few seconds. If you wish to customise the control assignments, there is a dedicated window. For Nuendo the driver comes ready-programmed: Shift + Mix toggles the top part of the Mixer on and off and Shift + Transport switches the metronome on and off. Personally, I would resist the temptation to map too many other controls to key combinations, in the interests of keeping it simple.

Protocols are hardware controllers' Achilles heel. Although Mackie's venerable HUI protocol is something of a *lingua franca* it isn't particularly comprehensive and many current applications do not support it. The Rolls-Royce solution is a purpose-written controller driver for each specific application. This takes time and therefore money to implement and thus frequently produces a 'chicken and egg' situation where neither the hardware manufacturer nor the software author wants to write drivers unless they think it will result in more sales. For the moment, the FaderPort has purpose-written drivers for Steinberg's Nuendo and Cubase (albeit only on the PC), Cakewalk's Sonar 6 and Mark of the Unicorn's Digital Performer. Other applications, including Digidesign's Pro Tools, are supported via the HUI protocol.

In operation I found the FaderPort completely intuitive and a very valuable addition to the mouse and keyboard; but then for all except the most forensic of level changes a fader will always be my weapon of choice. If you have any fader jockey skills whatsoever, writing automation this way is a lot better than mousing around with an on-screen fader and infinitely preferable to dragging points on a rubber band. At this price, as long as the audio or video application you use can be persuaded to support it properly, the FaderPort is a winner. ■

PROS Elegant simplicity; price; brings about a real productivity boost.

CONS Limited native driver support for the present; button action takes a while to get used to.

EXTRAS

The Presonus FireStudio FireWire and MIDI interface also has an optional monitor controller, the MSR or Monitor Station Remote, and these two can be combined with the FaderPort to create a complete system of I-O and control.

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